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ABSTRACT

Moral decision-making is an essential element in educational research. The dilemmas examined and explored in this review were drawn from the author's experience as an ethnographic evaluator and consultant in a bay area educational research corporation for the last five years. The major concerns addressed include: conflicting expectations between sponsor and researcher, conflicting roles and interests of the researcher, and the research report--the publication and dissemination of findings. The creation of a report is often the product of a delicate interplay between the academy and advocacy. In addition, job stress and burnout are discussed. (BW)

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The Art of Moral Decision Making in Educational Research

by

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The Art of Moral Decision Making in Educational Research

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Moral decision making is an essential element of every field of endeavor. This form of critical self-examination refines both the individual and field. Risk benefit analysis, respect-for-persons ethic, and basic pragmatism are all useful guidelines in the art of moral decision making. Like Klocklars (1979),

> I personally have little use for the kind of moral study which seeks to understand how angels behave in paradise and do not intend this analysis to be a contribution to that literature (1979:265).

The dilemmas examined and explored in this review were drawn from my experience as an ethnographic-evaluator and consultant in a bay area educational research corporation for the last five years. The major concerns addressed in this review include: conflicting expectations between sponsor and researcher, conflicting roles and interests of the researcher, and the report - the publication and dissemination of findings. The creation of a report is often the product of a delicate interplay between the academy and advocacy. In addition, job stress and burnout are discussed.

Sponsors

Conflicting expectations between sponsors and researchers is a common dilemma. For example, sponsors have become increasingly aware of the strengths and weaknesses of ethnography in evaluation. Many sponsors, however, have been lured by ethnography's reputation for "finding out what's going on" without understanding what it is or more to the point what it is not. A request for proposal may specify the use of ethnogrphic techniques, the proposal may specify the use of ethnographic techniques, and upon award of the contract the project

officer may expect a priori closed questionaire-type interview protocols - with statistical correlations. These expectations may represent useful approaches in other studies, however, these expectations do not meet the realities of ethnographic research. A sponsor's acceptance of a proposal is a binding contract. Ethnographers entering such an agreement, however, must recognize that the two parties may have differing sets of responsibilities and expectations.

Similarly, when a researcher proposes a randomized experimental design and finds it inappropriate when in the field, the researcher must expect some resistance from the sponsor to a proposed change in plans. Unfortunately, some researchers are often pressured into implementing inappropriate research designs for fear of antagonizing the sponsor and jeapordizing funding (see Fetterman 1982). There are no simple answers to these dilemmas. It is, however, both the researcher's and the sponsor's responsibility to resolve these conflicts in a manner that serves each parties pragmatic interests without compromising the methodological integrity of the agreement.

Roles

The researcher is required to play many roles in the pursuit of knowledge. The researcher must function as an intermediary between program participants and sponsors, participants and the research corporation, and between participants themselves. One of the most serious ethical dilemmas that emerge from working in educational research is the development of conflicting roles and interests.

> Even in unusually benign instances the field researcher must be very sensitive in his presentation of self and management of social interactions. In most cases, though, the fieldworker encounters social complexities and problems at every turn, and successful role maintenance demands great presence of mind, flexibility, and luck. (Pelto 1970, p.

Politics further compounds these role maintenance problems. The fieldworker is required to play many roles in the political context of contract research. These roles confer many responsibilities.

Conducting research in a recent national evaluation illustrated the complexity of these relationships and the diversity of roles required to function in this setting. The researcher conducted research in the street, the classroom, student and community members' homes, public schools, the programs' local and national disseminating organizations, city governments, the research corporation, the governmental managing agency, and the sponsoring agency. Each of these levels have conflicting groups within each strata, e.g. student, teacher, and principal on the school level. As Klockars (1977) explained:

> The problem of conflicting role obligations in biomedical experimentation, where researcher-subject and physician-patient dilemmas arise, has been highly troublesome to attempts to develop ethics for biomedical research. However, such problems do not begin to approach the complexity of conflicts and reciprocal obligations and expectations characteristic of anthropological or life history fieldwork. (p. 219)

It is difficult to maintain a rapport with rival groups unless one establishes oneself as an independent entity sensitive to each party's concerns, and interested in collecting information from all sides. Taking sides (purposely or inadvertently) early in the research erects barriers to communication with rival groups (see Berreman 1962). First and foremost, however, the research's responsibility lies with the individual at the center of the research task - in this case the student. The researcher must respect the student's rights and maintain an intricate web of obligations, including confidentiality and reciprocity. The fieldworker must maintain perspective within this

convoluted structure and remember that the respect-for-persons ethic overrides all concerns. Committments, such as those of confidentiality must be adhered to if we are to continue to work with individuals, as Mead said, "in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect" (1969).

State Bureacracy

This juggling act becomes more difficult with the addition of another party. The researcher is also responsible to the taxpayer. Supporting the federal or state bureaucracy (a representative of the taxpayer) is often an unpopular position. An "agency relationship with the state" is created when a researcher accepts governmental funds. The state assumes both legal and political liability for the actions of the researcher in this relationship. The researcher that enters into a binding contract, in return, has an obligation (contractual and ethical) to fulfill his/her commitment to the sponsor. This includes following the evaluation design of the study (unless amended or modified), pursuing research and presenting findings with the sponsor's interests guiding the research, and being fiscally, administratively, and academically accountable to them. In a Weberian sense, these relationships force one to conclude that "the occupational structure of modern science makes research, ethically speaking, a 'political vocation'." (Klockars 1979:264).

In conventional ethnography, for example, it is not unusual to scratch one's line of inquiry and select another topic and mode of investigation based on informant's information. This usually occurs when the anthropologist is alerted that there is a more pressing or appropriate research concern in the area. In contract research, however, the sponsor and researcher establish the topic and mode of inquiry before entering the field and leave little room for alteration.

This is not to say that the study design is cast in stone. Information gathered from field experiences is taken into consideration and may suggest alternative methods are required to answer the study's policy questions. Field information, no matter how compelling, however, is rarely considered sufficient to drop one's topic of investigation - political pressures are the most powerful force in this regard.

This is not a call for blind obedience or an abdication of one's responsibilities to ensure that research is conducted properly regardless of political pressures. Nor is this discussion aimed at absolving the researcher from a commitment to program participants and colleagues. This discussion is presented to stress an obligation that receives little attention at best and outright condescension at worst.

The Report

One of the most common mediums for interaction in the political realm is the report. A report rich in detail is potentially as dangerous as it may be helpful - depending upon how the material is presented and who uses the information. Tobin's Ph.D. dissertation, for example, "The Resettlement of the Enewatak People: A Study of a Displaced Community in the Marshall Islands"(1976), represents a classic case of misused information. Tobin's study was used by the Air Force as a resource document for preparing a misleading environmental impact statement regarding the Pacific Cratering Experiments (PACE) project. This area was the site of numerous nuclear tests. The PACE project planned to use this area for further high explosive testing and used parts of Tobin's work to support their position. Tobin responded,

> I did not give you permission to do this and it is protected by copyright as clearly indicated in the early part of my dissertation. Parts of this work that would have helped the people of Eniwetok against the PACE program were not quoted

in the draft environmental statement.

> I am biased against the PACE program as I have told Mr. ____(the director of PACE) as I feel it is against the best interests of the Eniwetok people and it is against their expressed wishes. (Department of the Air Force, 1973, p. 56).

Serious ethical dilemmas emerge when one's role makes one privy to confidential information that requires exposure. Ibsen's An Enemy of the People (1959), Solzhenitsyn's For the Good of the Cause (1972), and Daniel Ellsberg's Papers on the War (pentagon Papers) (1972) dramatically illustrate this type of double bind. In one of my studies, this type of double bind was confronted on every level. A few of those were encountered in the streets. The school setting also provided a number of cases. For example, substituting for a sick teacher presented no serious difficulty; however, substituting for a frequently tardy or alcoholic teacher presented a number of difficulties. Should the researcher condone such behavior and administrative laxness by substituting for the teacher and not reporting the incident in his or her report? Or, should the researcher simply look at the practical side - the students need a teacher for that period. From a research perspective, serving as a teacher-researcher provides an invaluable insight into the program. Moreover, the problem of managerial laxness can be demonstrated in other manners. In this case, a risk-benefit approach was extremely useful in moral decision making. The risks of reporting the incident for the individual teacher's reputation and the program's survival outweighed the benefits, given that the matter could be resolved with less dramatic measures: (informally bringing the problem to the attention of the school administrator). The matter would have required publication if administration had not resolved the problem immediately, because the risk to the student population (of dropping out

again) and to the staff (lowering morale) would have been greater than the benefits of protecting one teacher and administrator's positions. Discretion, in any case, must be exercized in the case of reporting observed indiscretions. For example, reporting a rare occurrence such as a fight or an affair between a student and a staff member on school grounds can unfairly distort a picture of program operations. Moreover, the consequences of reporting such behavior "may not match the crime," e.g. the entire program could be closed down for such activities. (See Deloria, 1980, for a discussion of the larger social context of research and the role of the researcher).

Another problem that must be confronted is the power of numerous vested interests. The pressures of various vested interest groups often impinge on the fieldworker's ability to produce a fair and balanced report of study findings. For example, in the study discussed above the staff wanted me to record and document the implementation difficulties in the report as a means of solving their programmatic problems. The disseminators, however, took a different position. They commented on a draft of one of the reports that the ethnographic study was a "scholarly approach," however, they were concerned with the presentation of the findings.

> Certainly, [the disseminating agency] has gleaned a great deal of knowledge during the demonstration which we are applyling to future replication approaches. [The research corporation] has been very helpful in this regard. However, we are down to the wire in terms of the presentation of the final results to society at large. Certainly, [the disseminating agency] has a vested interest in the [program] being presented in the final reports in the best possible light. I am sure that others such as --, --, [federal agencies], and [the research corporation] feel the same... [Program] expansion in the future faces an uncertain future in this age of shrinking financial resources and competitive and political realities, etc. We need to present the most accurate, fair, and balanced picture of the replication which, hopefully, proves that [the program] merits

continuation and expansion. I trust that you will consider the same.

Their message was clear. I was sympathetic to the political realities; however, I was obligated to include some negative findings to present the most accurate picture of program operations. For example, along with numerous positive findings I included serious implementation problems such as high staff turnover rates and managerial incompetence and/or lack of appropriate qualifications. The negative impact of the federal government and the evaluators was also discussed to provide a picture of the extrinsic forces that negatively affected the program and resulted in unfavorable site descriptions (Fetterman, 1981a, 1981c). This was an example of "studying up" in the stratification system (Nader, 1969). Ignoring these problems would have done litte for knowledge development in the area of implementation and distorted the readers' view of program operations. This would have represented an abdication of my responsibility to the staff, taxpayers, and my colleagues. A basic misconception that was dispelled in this regard is that ethnographers are always coopted by their informants and always present the most positive side (their key informant's side). The duty of the ethnographer, like any scientist, is fundamentally to accurately record and report his or her observations and interpretations. In this case, the observations were primarily positive but the findings were not exclusively placed in a positive light.

Dissemination of Findings

The dissemination of the draft report was also problematic. The anthropological code of ethics explains that the findings of research must be shared with clients and sponsors. This guide, however, does not prepare the researcher for dealing with many levels of administration

and protocol. In the study under discussion, there was a rivalry between the parent organization disseminating the alternative high school program and some of the local affiliates directly responsible for managing the program. The parent organization was the central conduit for draft reports. The evaluators were informed, however, that one site would not receive the draft for comments because they had new management and staff and would be demoralized by the descriptions of past strife. In addition, the new program would not have the background required to critique the work. The evaluators were also informed that another site would not receive the report, according to the parent organization, because they misused it the last time; they revealed portions of the confidential draft report to various sources out of context. In the first case, it was true that the report referred to the old staff and would not have been productive reading for the new staff. In the second case, the evaluators would have fed the fire of this rivalry if it were to circumvent the system of protocol by sending the drafts to the sites directly; however, they would not be fulfilling their obligation if they allowed the parent organization to control the distribution of the reprort.

A compromise was made. All the copies were sent to the parent organization to follow protocol and avoid charges of favoritism. A provision was made, however, that site comments would be requested directly by the evaluators by the end of the month. Any report lost in the mail would then be sent directly to the site by the evaluators. This placed a check on the distribution of the drafts without compromising the evaluator's role or neglecting the significance of protocol.

The presentation of findings to the public is a political activity.

The manner in which research findings are presented influence how the information will be used or abused. The researcher who plays the role of politician while conducting research, however, is likely to be used as a pawn by various vested interests. The dissemination of findings after the research has been conducted is a separate matter. The evaluators, in the earlier case, disseminated the generally positive findings to appropriate individuals in government and quasi-governmental institutions. Future funding for the program was dependent on the dissemination of the evaluation findings and the recommendations of various agencies. In addition, the evaluators prepared a Joint Dissemination Review Panel Submission to improve the program's credibility and potential to secure future funding. These actions were in accord with Mills' (1959) position that:

> There is no necessity for working social scientists to allow the potential meaning of their work to be shaped by the "accidents" of its setting, or its use to be determined by the purposes of other men. It is quite within their powers to discuss its meanings and decide upon its uses as matters of their own policy. (p. 177).

The evaluators agreed that they had a moral responsibility to serve as an advocate for the program based on the research findings. As James (1977) has discussed:

> Advocacy on behalf of social change is the final step in the use of ethnography. It is also the only reasonable justification for probing the life-styles of these human beings (p.198).

There is a difference between being an academic and an activist; however, academic study does not preclude advocacy. In fact, often anything less represents an abdication of one's responsibility as a social scientist. (See Berreman, 1968; and Gough, 1968). It should be acknowledged, however, that the researcher functions as a public

relations person or politician in this arena rather than as a researcher.

Job Stress and Burnout

Finally, the ethnographic evaluator faces one of the most common but least discussed hazards in the profession - job stress and burnout. The job-related stress that an ethnographic evaluator or fieldworker experiences has been discussed throughout this review. Job burnout involves the complete loss of interest or motivation in pursuing the individual employment tasks required to satisfactorily function in one's role. This is often the result of prolonged exposure to the pressures of the job. This can severely cripple the most able researcher. Judgment, determination, and stamina (all critical qualities for a fieldworker) are all affected by job stress and burnout. Fieldwork in contract ethnography must be conducted at an accelerated pace in a much shorter period of time than traditional fieldwork. This is both physically and mentally demanding. Continuous immersion in the personal and professional problems of informants can be emotionally draining as well. Stories of arson for hire, a mother stabbing her daughter's boyfriend, an administrator harassing a staff member, graft, and racism are part of the everyday lives of many informants; however, this continual immersion into hundreds of individual lives can take its toll on the ethnographer. Wax (1971) provided a detailed picture in this regard of "shooting, beating and murder" and the resultant turmoil she experienced in a Japanese-American relocation center. Kobben (1967) reported of his Surinam fieldwork that:

> since an ethnographer studies people and not insects, his fieldwork also causes emotions in himself. Personally, I lived under great psychological stress and felt little of the proverbial peacefulness of "country life." Few books touch on the subject, but I know that the same is true of quite a number of other fieldworkers. Perhaps it is even a sine qua non for fieldwork. (p. 46)

The theory, research, and intervention practices related to job stress and burnout in human services occupations are discussed in detail in Cherniss (1980) and Paine (1982).

This experience is compounded by the father confessor or mea culpa compression effect. Contract research requires in-depth immersion in a site for short periods of time at regular intervals throughout the year. Informants realize the ethnographer will only be on site for a week or two and rush to communicate pressing problems. The nature of the visits structures the informant's response. An effort must be made to take this phenomenon into consideration--to balance one's perspective of the site's operations. Once a rapport is established with a few key informants and the ethnographer learns who must be listened to with a grain of salt this problem can be ameliorated.

The fieldwork experience is made more stressful by a demanding travel schedule. One to two week site visits throughout the country can keep a researcher away from home for over a month at a time. Life on the road has all the hazards faced by old-time salesmen: road food, empty motels, and the routine separation from your family--in this case every three months. Allan Holmberg (1969) provided vivid illustrations of the physically draining side of fieldwork. (Also see Wax, 1960, p. 175.) A few survival tips learned in the field to cope with this type of stress include: maintaining regular contacts with the family, spending time with friends in the field in relaxing or entertaining settings, or meeting relatives or colleagues during weekends or "break periods" while on the road. Also, attending professional meetings during these free periods serves to re-charge oneself while in the field. Pelto emphasizes the value of brief vacations during the field-work experience.

> A number of fieldworkers have noted that brief vacations away from the research community can be excellent tension relievers--for both informants and researchers. After all, at least in small communities the ubiquitous presence of "the man with the notebook and a thousand ques-

> tions" can be very taxing for the local inhabitants. They must surely wish that for once they could enact a small bit of local custom without having to explain it all to the anthropologist. A few days away--or even longer--in the city, at the beach, hiking in the mountains, or visiting a nearby game reservation--can give the fieldworker time to dissipate his anxieties and hostilities, get some needed physical rest, and perhaps restock his supplies. At the same time, the research community itself gets a rest. Often the return of the fieldworker after even a brief vacation is an occasion for a warm welcome, a reaffirmation of friendships. He may be treated like a returning relative, and a few slightly reluctant informants may have been opened up a bit in their willingness to give information. (Pelto 1970, p. 225)

One of the few redeeming virtues of this work life style, aside from meeting new people, is that it enables you to step back from the field experience to gain perspective and then back in to test one's hypotheses throughout the year. This is an advantage over traditional fieldwork where it is much easier to go native, or lose touch with the primary research task at hand.

Conclusion

Moral decision making is a tortuous process since each event is a convoluted and almost endless labyrinth of considerations and commitments. A simple shift in perspective or an unexpected twist of fate can alter one's entire set of responsibilities and obligations. Guilty knowledge and dirty hands are at the heart of the urban fieldwork experience. Recognition of this fact is essential if a fieldworker is to function effectively and morally. Awareness of the context of research can prevent paralysis as well as overzealousness in the field.

Ethical decisions in fieldwork must continuously be discussed and reviewed. This is not to suggest that we must institute sanctions

against ethical wrong doing, for

> the cost of emphasizing punishment as a means of regulation and control of occupational deviance is that it suppresses the kind of candid moral discourse which is necessary to make genuine moral maturity possible (Klockars 1979:279).

Fieldworkers will continue to encounter numerous personal and professional hazards in contract research. They may range from fieldwork conducted in an accelerated fashion to reporting in a highly political atmosphere. Many of these pressures affect one's judgment while in the field--whether in the streets of the inner city or in plush conference rooms with governmental officials in Washington, D.C. Ethnographers can adapt to most of these environmental pressures if they are aware of them.

> There have been few times in the past century when it has been so important for fieldworkers to involve themselves in processes of ethical decision making. As we do so, we are well advised to temper our instincts for self-preservation and self-determination with a realistic sense of the full range of contexts which impinge on contemporary research activities. Two seemingly opposite images come to mind. The first is an image of a world breathing down our necks, and the second is an image of a world ignoring us entirely. (Chambers, 1980, p. 341)

Participation in the art of moral decision making may not prevent the world from "breathing down our necks" or from "ignoring us", but it will ensure that we do not forget our own multiple sets of responsibilities.

> To improve the level of fieldwork practice, investigators must examine the moral dilemmas particular to this type of research, discover the appropriate ethical principles, and learn how best to apply them. If it is not done, regulation will become an elaborate and expensive charade, useful only in assuaging the sensibilities of legislators, who can convince themselves that they did their best to legislate morality without ever having

> bothered to examine just what moral standards are appropriate to a particular scientific method. (Cassell, 1980, p. 38)

This exploration into the hazards and ethical dilemmas that arise from urban fieldwork and contract research has attempted to examine the appropriateness of certain moral standards to the ethnographic method. It is hoped that this probing will be reflexive, stimulating other fieldworkers in anthropology, and in other disciplines, to examine themselves in their pursuit of knowledge.

Notes

1. For further details regarding the role of the ethnographer in educational evaluation, see Britan, 1977, 1978; Burns, 1975, 1978; Clinton, 1975, 1976; Colfer, 1976; Coward, 1976; Everhart, 1975; Fetterman, 1980, 1981a, 1981b, 1981c; Firestone, 1975; Fitzsimmons, 1975; Hall, 1978; Hord, 1978; Mulhauser, 1975; and Wolcott, 1980.
2. It should be emphasized that this involves working with colleagues from different disciplines and potentially conflicting paradigms in a multidisciplinary effort.
3. Weber's "Politics as a Vocation" is a study of the moral hazards of a political career. It emphasizes the use of morally dubious means in the attainment of "good ends". The parallel between the context of contemporary research and the political environment that Weber discussed highlights this moral hazard for contract research. (Weber 1946)
4. Weber's term was an "ethic of responsibility" (Weber 1946:120).
5. In the Soloway and Walters case no law was broken, according to the Pennsylvania penal code (see Soloway and Walters 1977:172-174). The moral issue remains and in other states the legal status of the event might differ significantly. It is inappropriate, however, to second guess the legitimacy of a fieldworkers actions in hindsight. There are a multitude of factors influencing behavior in the field at any given moment. Moreover, serendipity more closely characterizes even the most diligent efforts at structuring ethnography. Soloway and Walter's case indirectly emphasize the unpredictability of fieldwork.
6. The respect for persons ethic is usually applied to situations in which a researcher is contemplating deceit in order to secure information from a subject. The respect for persons ethic can also be applied to situations in which the researcher considers breaching a trust. These two examples demonstrate the role of "different levels of analysis" in ethical decision making.
7. This experience differs from what Wax (1971) describes as "when the fieldworker's overblown sense of his ability to offend or injure his hosts may so paralize him that he cannot carry on his work" (p.274). This type of problem can occur at the early stages of fieldwork when

the ethnographer is overly sensitive to informants (1971). Pauline Kael's solution, as noted in Wax (1971) is useful in this regard, "a mistake in judgment is not necessarily fatal, but that too much anxiety about judgment is". Nevertheless, although there are similarities of inaction the problem Wax describes is more of a methodological problem related to the early stages of fieldwork, while the problem discussed in this review is an ethical problem related to the respect for persons ethic in the process of conducting fieldwork.

8. In the study under discussion, most of the students involved in crime were involved in dope dealing, pimping, and petty theft - few were involved in "hard core" burglary. The "hard core" group was known in the community to have its own rules, sanctions, and social structure. This experience signalled to the "hard core" group what my role and position was regarding the burglary group in the community. The experience also provided an insight into who the program could and could not serve in the inner city.

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